

Jean-Pierre Caron 2014 interview of Joseph Nechvatal concerning Conceptual Art, Noise Music and Minóy



Jean-Pierre Caron: Well, first of all, I would like to thank you for accepting to do this interview. How did you get to know Minóy's work and how did you get involved in your book/cd/tape project about him? Also, I'm aware that his work is related to your own critical and theoretical endeavors and I would like to know from you what this relation would be.

Joseph Nechvatal: Minóy first came into my realm of awareness in the mail. I received in my Lower East Side mailbox a tape from him that I loved immediately: *In Search Of Tarkovsky*. I quickly began trading *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine* tapes with him for his work; my favorites being *Doctor In A Dark Room* (1985), *Nightslaves* (1986) and *Firebird* (1987). These tapes resonated considerably with the overloaded nature of the palimpsest-like gray graphite drawings I was working on then (which were reflective of the time's concerns around multiple forms of proliferation).

His work reminded me of when I first saw the obscure No Wave performer Boris Policeband play his screechy sounds in 1978 at a concert to benefit Colab's *X Magazine*. It was entrancing for me how Policeband appropriated police scanner radio transmissions, entwining them with his dissonant violin and hilarious voice. After Rhys Chatham, his brand of post-minimalism may have had the greatest influence on my striving for my own form of post-minimal chaos magic, an art of magical gazing.

Jean-Pierre Caron: In your articles for the book you insist a lot on an immersive character to Minóy's work and noise art in general. Can you characterize briefly this immersive quality?

Joseph Nechvatal: In general, his noise music is a form of labyrinthine droning superimposed collage electronics that produces in me an immersive otherworldly effect. But what do I mean when I say *immersion*? It is by no means uncomplicated. It is, like art, gradient. But for his noise music, I use the term immersion both in a strong sense: sound surrounds us, and in a weak sense: as a spontaneous substitution involved in suspending disbelief and outside stimulus for an interval of time, as when one's attention gets wrapped up in something compelling.

Jean-Pierre Caron: Picking from the title of your thesis *Immersive Ideas/ Critical Distances*, can you point out the relationships between this immersive character and the political/social critique you seem to recognize in noise art? Is the correct distance an essential component to the critical function of the work of art? In other words, has immersiveness itself a political/critical dimension, or if not, is it possible to somehow find it compatible it with critique?

Joseph Nechvatal: I am advocating with immersion into noise a double consciousness that is both inside and engaged with a compelling form while also maintaining an aloof outsider view of the interaction with that form. The political aspect comes in terms of subject matter most likely. For example, in the early 1980s, myself and many other artists, were interested in the distributive capacity of art based in reproduction. Most were inspired by a 1968 essay *The Dematerialization of Art* by John Chandler and Lucy R. Lippard, as it argued that Conceptualism had a politically transformative aspect to be delved into. The other inescapable text at the time was *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (or Reproducibility)* by Walter Benjamin. Thus inspired I produced a Colab sponsored show (with performances) simply called *John Heartfield* at ABC No Rio, held from November 1st to November 18th in 1983. Xeroxes and photomechanical blowups of John Heartfield's (1891-1968) art, torn from a book, were used as maquettes. Reproductions of his anti-Nazi/anti-Fascist photomontages were wheat-pasted all over the walls of ABC No Rio, walls that had been painted a sinister black from top to bottom.

Jean-Pierre Caron: I find this quote from the Lucy Lippard article very compelling: "Dematerialized art is post-aesthetic only in its increasingly non-visual emphases. The aesthetic of principle is still an aesthetic, as implied by frequent statements by mathematicians and scientists about the *beauty* of an equation, formula or solution: "Why should an aesthetic criterion be so successful so often? Is it just that it satisfies physicists? I think there is only one answer-nature is inherently beautiful" (physicist Murray Cell-Mann); "In this case, there was a moment when I knew how nature worked. It had elegance and beauty. The goddam thing was gleaming" (Nobel prizewinner Richard Feynman)."

And it agrees with Henry Flynt's *concept art* concept: a form of art the material of which is language. Flynt

was seeking to liberate art from its embodiment within the medium in what he called *structure art*, precisely art that is still embodied in the medium, such as the (musical) fugue, but that tries to convey an aesthetic sense more akin to mathematical thought than to properly artistic beauty. Concept art would be for him the next step - to liberate the aesthetic appeal of the concept from the artistic medium.

Joseph Nechvatal: I follow you ~ and am a big fan of both Lippard and Flynt.

Jean-Pierre Caron: What would be that political transformative aspect you talk about within conceptual art? One could see a somewhat contradictory relationship between concept (or conceptual) art and noise like Minóy's which is commonly seen as an engagement with the "non-conceptual", or that which exceeds the conceptual. Do you see some kind of continuity between them? When you insist on the political aspect being connected to subject matter, are you insisting upon a subject matter existing within noise?

Joseph Nechvatal: For me, a politically engaged art that transforms is a visionary conceptual art. And the art of noise aids visionary political conceptualism greatly.

Jean-Pierre Caron: Suspension of *disbelief* as symptomatic of the engagement with immersive noise art supposes disbelief is our everyday attitude? Of course I'm here referring to phenomenology's methodological *suspension of belief* and its belief in belief as the "natural attitude".

Joseph Nechvatal: Personally, my guiding avatar into immersive noise has been Janus ~ the two-faced Roman God who faces both directions simultaneously. Janus is similar to the ancient Egyptian God Aker, a two human-headed deity who surveys the western and eastern gates of duat (the underworld). As Janus has eyes on both sides of his head, a Janus-like belief system would be able to see and think on every side. Hence he is the symbol for noisy dehabituation, open-mindedness, and for taking an even-handed view, as Janus was able to look backward into the past as well as forward into the future. Moreover, he represents a question that has two sides to it.

Jean-Pierre Caron: When you propose the alternation of this immersive engagement and an "aloof outsider view" of that engagement, this amounts to a phenomenological mode of getting into the work? What effects are expected to be produced by this specific kind of relationship to the work?

Joseph Nechvatal: An immersive critical distance is established that is both inside and (birds-eye-view) outside. This means a seeing of seeing and a hearing of hearing.

Jean-Pierre Caron: Let's go back to Minóy. How were the tracks chosen and compiled? I am aware of the immensity of Minóy's back catalog. What criteria were used to choose the tracks that are in the cd/cassette?

Can you comment of the back story of this compilation?

Joseph Nechvatal: Phillip (PBK) and I were not interested in editing longer compositions down to excerpts for this project. We were more interested in compiling a collection of his shorter works from different time-frames in his career, thus allowing a listener to come away with a greater sense of Minóy's achievement. So that is what we did. I made the final selection flow sequence, and Phillip OKed it and did all the re-mastering.

The chapter of the *Minóy* book "After Words: The Obscurity of Minóy" is the complete backstory of how Phillip and Amber rescued the material from oblivion. It is quite a tale. We owe Phillip a huge debt of thanks for saving an American master.

Jean-Pierre Caron: This monumentality of Minóy's back catalog is due mainly to the medium used: the cassette recorder and the flourishing cassette and mail art trading culture. A culture you took active part on through the *Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine*. What were the ideas behind Tellus? What was the influence the cassette recorder had in those days, and what do you think of the re-emergence of cassette as a means for distributing music nowadays? It seems to me that the appeal of the cassette today is the opposite of the one it had in the 80's and it is linked with some kind of fetish character and the limited access one have today to cassette recorders as opposed to mp3, and internet availability. Don't you think that there is, perhaps a desire to artificially recreate what you called the *obscurity* of the work (as in "the obscurity of Minóy") through this limiting of the access, by preserving it's *underground* character?

Joseph Nechvatal: Well, yes. The cassette back then meant cheap, ease, speed, mobility and the ephemeral. Now it is a collector's item ~ and a fetish. But that's OK too.

Jean-Pierre Caron: Your involvement with immersive noise art isn't limited to your writing, but spreads through painting and music-making (I refer to your *viral sympathOny*). Is this spread through different means a result of the immersive ideals?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yea. Ideals are concepts. I am a conceptualist ~ or more precisely ~ a post-conceptualist, as I sensualize data. I followed my viral concept wherever the code would take me ~ within all the arts.

Jean-Pierre Caron: How do you see the relationship between all those different kinds of assessment of the real - music, painting, theory?

Joseph Nechvatal: The post-conceptual art object shows us that a lacunae world of incessant transmutation has emerged in art that corresponds to how we now live: in an open area of vast connecting links. With the increased augmentation of the self via micro-electronics, the virtual now co-exists with the actual (thus the

term *viractual*) as the digital links with the organic. Consequently, the *post-conceptual art object* demonstrates an interlaced sense of artistic viractuality that couples the static with the malleable.

Jean-Pierre Caron: I quote from *Immersive Ideals/Critical Distances*: “It seems to me however that one must take this understanding a bit further and maintain that art is utterly dependent upon, and is in fact, *metaphysics* (...).” And metaphysics, you continue, is in fact *ideology*. Does that mean that ontology is dependent upon the social/cultural world? In what sense is art metaphysics? Does it create the world, or does it give the means for assessing the fabric of the real?

Joseph Nechvatal: Conceptual Art focused attention on the idea behind the object and questioned the traditional role of that object as the conveyor of meaning. Subsequently, those theories cast doubt upon the necessity of materiality itself as conceptual artists de-materialized the post minimal art object and began to produce time-based and ephemeral artworks. Although total dematerialization of the art object never occurred, the art object became flexible – malleable – and that malleability, coupled with semiotics and computer processing, has resulted in the new metaphysics behind the post-conceptual art object.

Jean-Pierre Caron: “Therefore the critical distance gained from a congregation of explicit metaphysical/ideological conceptions are fundamental to the understanding of *immersive art* (...), just as they are with all art, as art is never transparent but always stem from concealed and forgotten theory-laden processes of idealization.” In the Minóy book you talk about a kind of unconcealment of the noisy fabric of our information culture. Is all art in its metaphysical connection a form of unconcealment?

Joseph Nechvatal: All art does manifest. But the point is that within noisy post-conceptual art, all signs are subject to boundless semiosis ~ which is to say that they are translatable into other signs. The post-conceptual art object recognizes and uses the fabric of all-over digitization while being culturally aware of the values of monumentality and permanency ~ qualities that can be found in some powerful analog art. This indicates and initiates communions of the protoplasmic body to virtual spatial conditions. Consequently, the post-conceptual aspect of art articulates a new sense of embedded life; with parts evident and parts obscure.